

INTRIGUE

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THE LITTLE GREEN BOOK

by JACK RITCHIE

What do you do with an old revolutionary
and a cause he will not let die?

Kill them both? No, not quite

THE OLD MAN sighed. "Amador is dead, too?"

"Yes," I said. "And yet he almost succeeded. He killed two of the General's guards before he was shot down."

The old man sat down on the bench beside the mountain hut. "Tell me how it went."

"I took the motor bus to the capitol and went to where Amador lives with his parents," I said.

"When I arrived we had several glasses of wine, for there was still an hour before the General's ceremony."

The old man frowned slightly, for he does not drink.

"Amador needed some courage," I said. "I thought it was for the best that he drink a little. I do not think that a little wine did harm. He did not fail because of that."

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The old man waved a hand slightly. "Go on."

"I gave him the revolver," I said. "And then I went alone to the church which overlooks the Presidential Square. I climbed to the tower where I could watch what would happen. There were many people in the square and on the platform with the General there were foreigners who people say advise the General."

The old man nodded. "It has happened in other countries."

"There were speeches to mark the opening of the new military road," I said. "From the tower I could not see Amador in the crowd. I did not see him at all until it happened." I paused for a moment and then went on. "When the General rose to say his words, I heard the gunshots and saw the two guards fall. And then I saw Amador—for just one moment. He had almost reached the top of the platform when the machine guns fired. And then it was over. Amador was dead."

The old man rubbed his eyes. "How many have we lost? Cajal, Molinos, Gondomar?"

"And Evariste," I said.

"Yes. And Evariste." He spoke tiredly. "I had almost forgotten. I am an old man and I forget."

"It does not matter," I said. "They were not patriots. They did what they did for money."

The old man shook his head. "You are too harsh. The money I

gave them does not replace their lives."

We looked silently down the mountain. Below us lay the border and beyond that the north and freedom. There were wire fences and guards, but one could get through if one knew the way.

Once again I asked, though I knew what his answer would be. "Why do you not leave? Why do you not go where you are safe?"

The old man smiled faintly. "So many of my kind have fled across the border vowing that they would remember the homeland. But once they were gone and safe, they were content to live and forget. No, I cannot leave my country's soil. My place is here."

In the days before the General came to power, the old man had been one of the great land owners. In the mornings he would ride his horse among the fields and the workers, and when he returned in the evening he would not have seen one-tenth of what he owned.

The estates are broken up now and each family has been allotted 20 acres. The peasants seem content, though there are shortages and there is talk that soon each man's 20 acres will be taken away again to create a commune such as they have in many parts of the country. But that is talk which no one chooses to believe.

The old man stared at his folded hands. "We must find someone else."

I looked to where the sun had almost set. "I think that the time has now come for me to do what we know is necessary."

The old man looked up. "No. I cannot allow you to go. If there were some guarantee that you would succeed, then perhaps I might. But if you failed, then I would be alone. I could do nothing anymore." He rose and patted my shoulder. "You are my eyes and my ears. I cannot leave this hut. I must hide here. If my face were seen, it would be the end. Many people still believe in the General."

It had been six months since I had turned the mountain path and seen the old man for the first time. I had been hunting for the small deer of this region, for since the General has come there is little meat in my village.

He had been ragged and bearded and yet I had known who he was, for he had once been president of the Republic and his picture had been on the walls of every schoolroom.

He had raised his hands when I pointed the gun and had waited. Perhaps to be shot.

I had stood there and wondered what to do, for in times such as these one must protect one's self. To allow a man such as he to go free—to escape—could be dangerous if it were ever known.

I do not know what I might have done, but then the rains came—

swiftly and heavily as they do in the season—and we had taken refuge in the hut.

And I had let him talk, for there was nothing else to do until the rains ceased, and he had spoken of freedom and country and what must be done by patriots.

When the rains stopped, I had shared my food with him, for he was hungry, and we came to an agreement.

Now the old man's eyes were tired. "We must go on. We must not fail again."

"No," I said. "The General must die."

For a moment doubt seemed to cross his face. "Does it do any good to kill this one man?"

"He is the General," I said.

He smiled sadly. "You are simple and direct. But if we kill this one man, will it change things? Is this new movement more than just one man? Will the General be replaced by someone who is worse?"

"I do not know," I said. "But we must hope that what we do is right."

He nodded slowly. "Yes. We must do something. Whatever we can." He took several weary breaths. "I sit here and know nothing of what occurs in our country. Without a radio or even newspapers it is difficult to know what the people really want."

I spat upon the ground. "The newspapers are not worth reading. They are all about the General

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and how much his people love him."

We were silent and then the old man said again, "Now we must find someone else. Someone who will be more successful than Amador."

"Yes," I said. "I will go to the capital tomorrow."

It was almost dark now. I bade the old man goodbye and went down the path to the village where I sleep.

I returned to the hut on the mountain three days later.

The old man had been hiding in the brush, but he came out when he saw that it was only me.

"You have found someone?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Guerrero is his name. He is a man who drinks. Who brawls. But he is a man of great physical courage and will do much for money."

The old man frowned. "Can we trust such a one as that? Will he risk death?"

"He does not plan to die," I said. "He is very expert with a rifle."

The old man gave that thought. "Do you think he will succeed?"

"Yes," I said. "I think he will

succeed."

The old man took the little green book from his pocket and wrote. He tore the paper from the book along the dotted lines. "Ten thousand," he said. "You will remind Guerrero that this check is good. Not in this country, of course, but across the border where I still have lands and money. Will he know how he can get the money?"

"He will know," I said. "Like the others."

Down the mountainside, at the turn in the path, I waved to the old man and then continued on my way.

Cajal. Molinos. Gondomar. Evariste. Amador. And now Guerrero.

I smiled.

They were but names and I had taken them from the air. The men did not exist and never had.

How much money did the old man still have?

But perhaps I should not be greedy.

This time when I crossed the border to cash the check, I thought I would remain there.

